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RESULTS OF THE FIRST CONGOLESE MOKELE-MBEMBE EXPEDITION

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INTRODUCTION

Interest in the existence of an extraordinary animal called Mokele-Mbembe has continued since the two recent American-Congolese expeditions (see Roy P. Mackal, J. Richard Greenwell, and M. Justin Wilkinson, 1982, The Search for Evidence of Mokele-Mbembe in the People's Republic of the Congo, *Cryptozoology*, Vol. 1: 62–72; see also Herman A. Regusters, 1982, Mokele-Mbembe: An Investigation Into Rumors Concerning a Strange Animal in the Republic of the Congo, 1981, *Munger Africana Library Notes*, Vol. 12(64): 1–27). Evidence found by these expeditions concerning the existence of this animal has greatly interested the international scientific community, particularly since the described morphology of the animal is similar to that of the sauropod dinosaurs of the Mesozoic. As a result of this, a meeting was held in early 1982 to discuss the feasibility of conducting a Congolese government-sponsored expedition to determine the existence of Mokele-Mbembe.

The meeting included representatives from the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry for the Promotion of the Arts and Scientific Research, the Ministry of Tourism and the Environment, the Ministry of Water and Forests, and the author, who participated in one of the American expeditions (see Mackal, Greenwell, and Wilkinson 1982, above) as a biologist representing the Congolese government.

The new expedition was originally planned for 1982, but a series of technical, organizational, and financial difficulties rendered this impossible. Consequently, the expedition was rescheduled for April–May of 1983. The expedition, under the leadership of the author, left Brazzaville for the Likouala region on April 3, 1983.

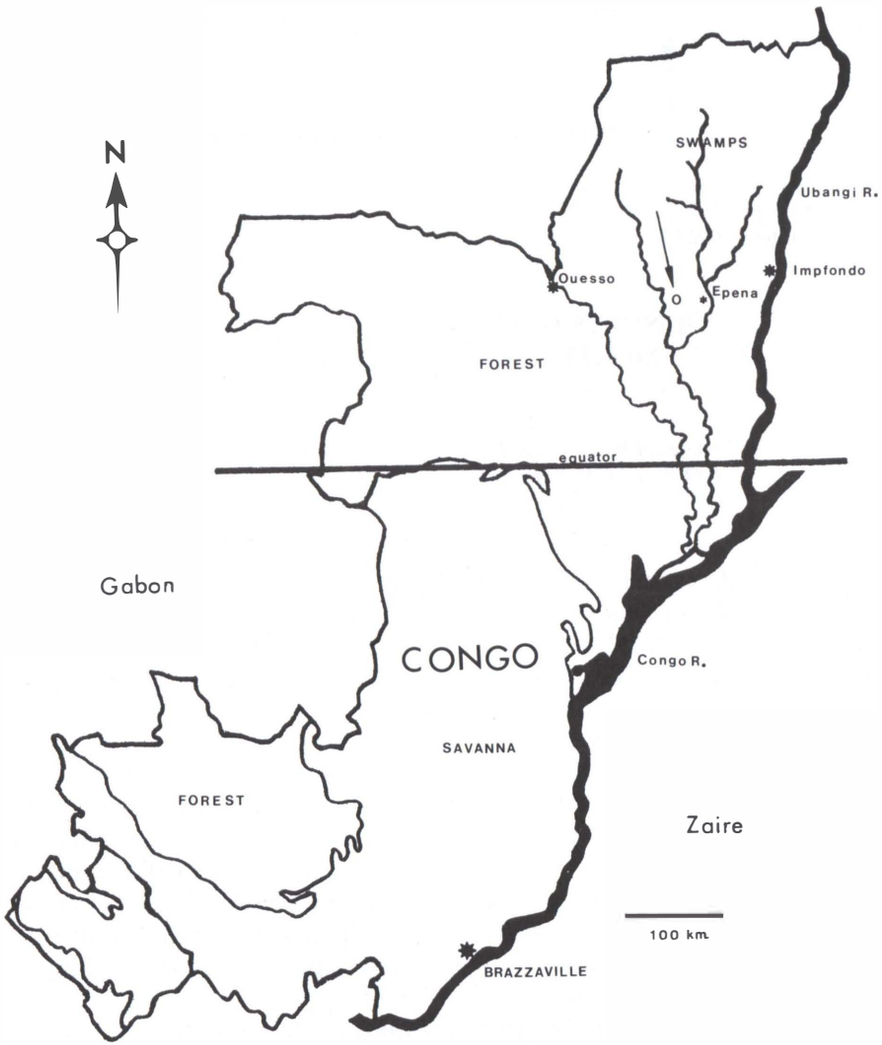

FIG. 1.—Map of the People's Republic of the Congo. The expedition flew from Brazzaville, in the south, to Epena, in the north, located on the Likouala River. Approximate location of Lake Telle indicated by arrow. Most of the northern part of the country is comprised of almost impenetrable, seasonally inundated swamp-forest.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

The expedition consisted of the following individuals: Marcellin Agnagna, biologist, Ministry of Water and Forests; Jean Marcel Abesse, zootechnician, Ministry of Water and Forests; Auguste Mfouka, engineer, Ministry of Water and Forests; Serge Etienne Mingouolo, chief technical agent, Ministry of Water and Forests; Marcel Ontsira, Ministry of National Defense; Honore Basso, Ministry of the Interior; and Romuald Ntekissa, Ministry of Information.

FIG. 2.—Typical small village on the banks of the Likouala River, as seen from dugout.

The expedition departed from Brazzaville for Epena, located on the Likouala River, where several days were spent preparing for the journey downriver (Fig. 1). The district commissioner loaned us a motorized dugout, and we also purchased 200 liters of motor fuel. The team then proceeded by dugout down the Likouala (Fig. 2), past the confluence of the Likouala and Bai Rivers, to Bouanila, where we initiated our fieldwork. Following discussions with villagers and dignitaries at Mokongo, we examined the Bolelo pool, in which Mokele-Mbembe is said to be found on occasion. Certain indications of the existence of a large animal were uncovered. The second point of study was Botongo, but no further evidence was uncovered there.

We then proceeded north to Edzama, Djeke, and finally Boha, the inhabitants of which "own" Lake Telle, one of the reported habitats of Mokele-Mbembe. The stay at Boha lasted one week, due to the reluctance of the villagers to cooperate with our expedition concerning our proposed work at Lake Telle. This was partly due to their negative experiences with one of the previous American expeditions in 1981. Finally, after a week of discussion, the villagers acceded to our requests, stating that they were only doing

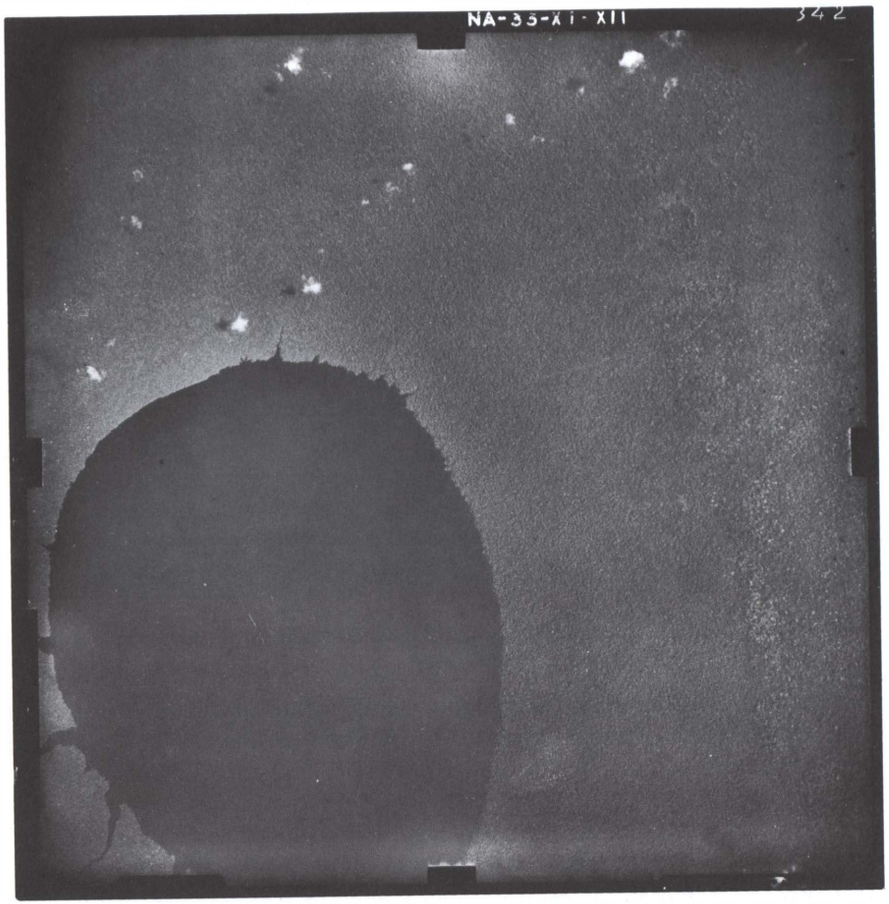

FIG. 3.—Aerial photo of Lake Telle, one of a long series of aerial photographs of the Likouala region taken by the French government. Note swamp-forest reaches the very edge of the lake. (*Institut Géographique National, Paris.*)

so because our expedition was an official project of the Congolese government. Even so, these disruptions had caused morale problems among expedition participants.

On April 26, the drums were beaten at Boha, while village elders made their ritual prayers invoking the spirits of their ancestors to protect the expedition members and ensure the success of the mission to Lake Telle. The expedition then set out on foot, accompanied by seven villagers from Boha who were to act as guides in the forest. The trail through the forest proved to be quite difficult and it was usually necessary to cut through the

FIG. 4.—Illustration by the author of the animal seen by him and two other witnesses in Lake Telle, from a distance of about 240 meters. The total length of the animal, presumed to be Mokele-Mbembe, was about 5 meters visible above the water.

foliage to allow passage. It being the dry season, water was scarce, and it became necessary to drink from muddy pools.

The 60-kilometer trek to Lake Telle was completed in 2 days, and it was with some emotion that we finally looked across this little sea, located right in the heart of the equatorial forest of Central Africa. The lake is oval in shape, about 5 kilometers by 4 kilometers (Fig. 3). A base camp was established at the water's edge, and one of the Boha villagers caught a large turtle which served as dinner that first night. Two days of intensive observing of the lake produced no sightings of the supposed Mokele-Mbembe, although there were frequent observations of a large turtle, with a shell reaching 2 meters in length.

On May 1, 1983, the author decided to film the fauna in the low-canopy forest surrounding the lake. This forest is a habitat for many mammalian and bird species. The author and two Boha villagers, Jean Charles Dinkoumbou and Issac Manzamoyi, set out early in the morning. At approximately 2:30 p.m., the author was filming a troop of monkeys. One of the villagers, Dinkoumbou, fell into a pool of muddy water, and went to the edge of the lake to wash himself. About 5 minutes later, we heard his shouts to come quickly. We joined him by the lake, and he pointed to what he was observing, which was at first obscured by the heavy foliage. We were then able to observe a strange animal, with a wide back, a long neck, and a small head (Fig. 4). The emotion and alarm at this sudden, unexpected event disrupted the author's attempt to film the animal with a Minolta XL-42 movie camera. The film had been almost totally exposed already, and the author unfortunately began filming with the lens cap on. By the time this was realized, the film had been totally exposed, as determined by subsequent processing in a French laboratory.

The animal was located at about 300 meters from the edge of the lake, and we were to able to advance about 60 meters in the shallow water, placing us at a distance of about 240 meters from the animal, which had become aware of our presence and was looking around as if to determine the source of the noise. Dinkoumbou continued to shout with fear. The frontal part of the animal was brown, while the back part of the neck appeared black and

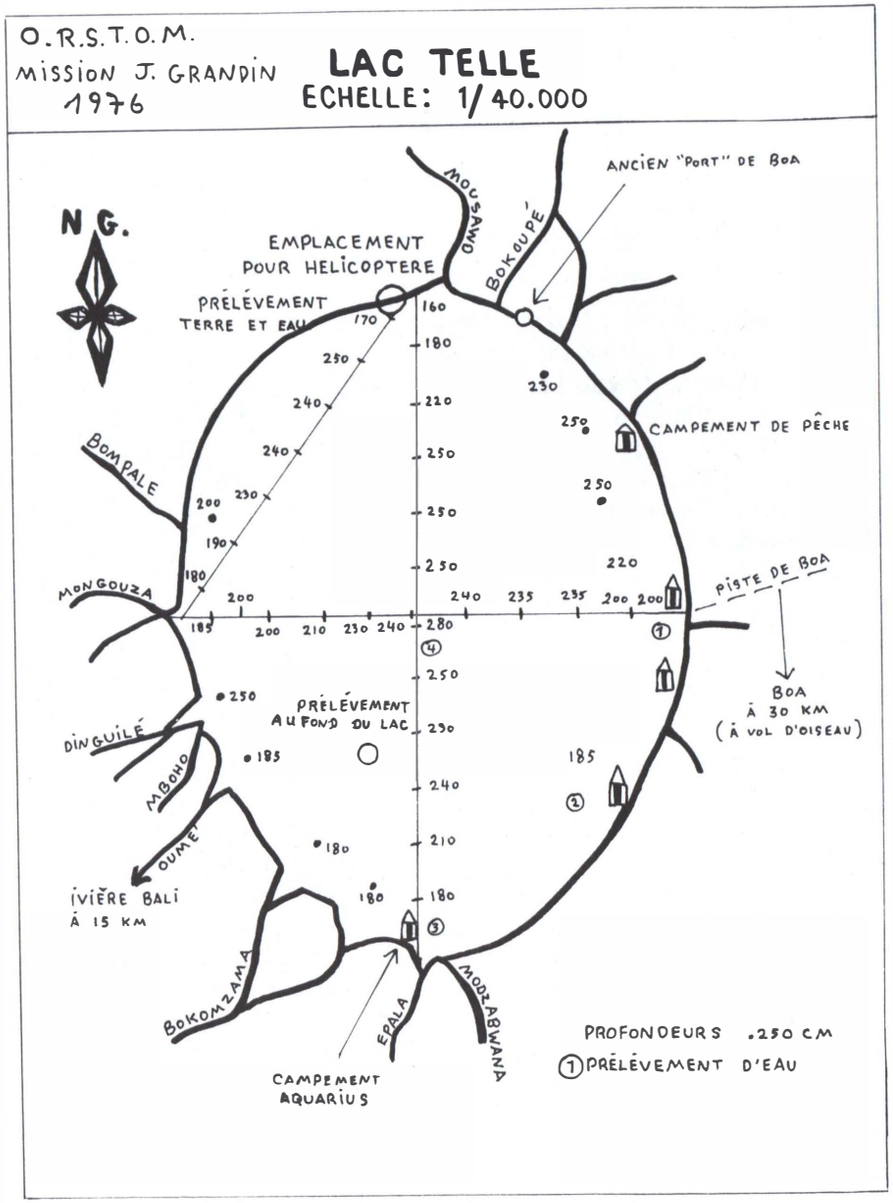

FIG. 5.—Field sketch of Lake Telle showing the measured depths obtained in 1976 by a French government expedition. Depths are in centimeters. Maximum depth, in the center, was 280 centimeters. (*Jean Grandin, Centre de Brazzaville, Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique Outre-Mer* [*ORSTOM*].)

shone in the sunlight. The animal partly submerged, and remained visible for 20 minutes with only the neck and head above the water. It then submerged completely, at which point we trekked rapidly through the forest back to the base camp, located 2 kilometers away. We then went out on the lake in a small dugout with video equipment to the spot where we had observed the animal. However, no further sighting of the animal took place.

It can be said with certainty that the animal we saw was Mokele-Mbembe, that it was quite alive, and, furthermore, that it is known to many inhabitants of the Likouala region. Its total length from head to back visible above the waterline was estimated at 5 meters.

The expedition's return to Boha through the same forest route took place on May 3, 1983, and we then proceeded back to Epena. Because of the remoteness of the Likouala region, we had great difficulty in returning to Brazzaville. After waiting for a week for the plane to pick us up at Epena, we were finally forced to trek over 100 kilometers through dense forests and swamps to Impfondo, on the Ubangi River, where there is a regular flight to Brazzaville. The trek to Impfondo proved to be a difficult and exhausting experience. The expedition formally terminated on May 17, the date of our return to Brazzaville. The entire expedition had taken 45 days.

RESULTS

The fauna of the Congo is still relatively unstudied. No thorough research in the area has ever been undertaken, and no comprehensive publications on the subject have appeared. The Likouala region, and more specifically the Epena district, with all its swamps and forests, remains almost entirely unfrequented by man. Because of the inaccessibility of the area, the zone has become a refuge for certain animal species, many of which were observed during the course of the expedition. Herds of buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*), ranging from five to 20 individuals, are found in the area of Mokongo. The buffalo population is quite dense in this region compared to other parts of the country, where it is becoming rare. The forest elephant (*Loxodonta africana cyclotis*), is still abundant, as it has been able to avoid most human contact. At Edzama, herds of between five and 15 individuals may be seen. Most primates withdraw into the forests and rarely show themselves in the areas of the villages or the rivers. The Western lowland gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) is still quite abundant in the Likouala region, including the swampy areas around Lake Telle.

The avifauna is quite varied and largely represented by ciconiiforms (herons, storks, and bitterns), falconiforms (fish eagles and black kites), pelicaniforms (cormorants), and some anseriforms. Marabou storks are present in significant numbers, and groups of up to 100 birds were seen on the sand banks at Mokongo. Reptiles are abundant in the Likouala, and crocodiles

may be seen sun-bathing on the sand banks. It is worth noting that crocodile hunting has diminished in this area because of a decrease in the purchasing of skins. In summary, the Likouala region remains one of the richest areas in terms of fauna, almost all known Congolese species being represented there, and the density of the populations is quite high. It is also suspected that the size of certain specimens observed in the Lake Telle area surpass that of the standard, turtles being one example.

It was verified that Lake Telle in generally quite shallow, with a depth of about 2–3 meters (Fig. 5). In certain areas, deep holes are found, reaching approximately 6 meters in depth. The water is dark, due to rotting vegetation, and visibility underwater does not exceed 50 centimeters. The bottom is muddy, with the layer of mud estimated at 70 centimeters in the middle of the lake and, at most, 150 centimeters around the sides. Various inlets of the lake branch off into small forest rivers, but these eventually terminate in thick vegetation.

Besides the known fauna of the region, there are many stories of encounters between local inhabitants and strange animals. It appears that the accounts of Mokele-Mbembe in the past have been based on actual occurrences, but the witnesses have left no written accounts for subsequent generations, oral accounts being the main form of information transmission in the area. With this current expedition, the situation has changed in that a trained biologist can now report his observation of one of these animals. And this individual is also acquainted with the known fauna of the Likouala.

Besides the sighting of Mokele-Mbembe by the author and two other witnesses, additional information of interest was obtained from villagers in other areas. One account concerned an event which took place in May, 1980, near the village of Mokongo. The witness noticed that the water had become murky in the area in which he was fishing, and that branches and leaves were floating on the surface of the river. Upon inspection, he found that trees and bushes had been dislodged from the riverbank, as well as large lumps of earth. A large animal was then observed in the water, but the morning mist made it impossible to distinguish its form. The destruction supposedly caused by this animal was observed by the expedition members. Apparently, according to different villagers, this phenomenon has occurred a number of times over the years.

Another event related to us occurred near Edzama just 2 weeks before our arrival. A village girl was returning home when her dugout became stuck on a sand bar. She pushed against the obstruction with her paddle, and found the dugout being forced against the sand bar once more. A large animal then appeared, creating a large disturbance on the water's surface. She was unable to distinguish the head or tail of the animal, but later indicated that the bulk

observed was the size of four forest elephants (which are smaller than the more commonly known African bush elephant). The girl was in a state of shock and was crying for help, and she was later rescued by her parents. Our inspection of this sand bar indicated that it had been well-swept by some agency, as if an animal had, in fact, been resting and moving a bulky body about on the sand.

At Djeke, we found unidentified footprints in the same location as where the Mackal expedition found the trail of a large, unknown animal (see Mackal, Greenwell, and Wilkinson 1982, above). The prints were very recent, no older than 4 days, and we were able to follow them for over 200 meters right to the edge of the water in the company of an elephant hunter, Immanuel Mongoumela, the same individual who had shown the trail to the Mackal expedition. This same individual reported that, since the Mackal expedition had been there, he had observed, on three separate occasions, a long-necked animal eating vegetation while submerged in the water. Only the neck of the animal had been visible as it consumed leaves and fruit. He identified the plant eaten as the Mabondji, and also the fruit of the Molombo (see Charles W. Weber, James W. Berry, and J. Richard Greenwell, 1982, Mokele-Mbembe: Proximate Analysis of Its Supposed Food Source, *Cryptozoology,* Vol. 1: 49–53). Mongoumela is one of the few witnesses who remains unmystified by the presence of these animals. He considers them as natural to the ecology of the area as others he encounters. It should be noted that he has been an experienced hunter for over 30 years.

In summary, it can be concluded that the first Congolese expedition in search of Mokele-Mbembe was highly successful. The animal itself was observed at Lake Telle, and evidence supporting the existence of other individuals in the Likouala region was obtained. Fieldwork was conducted under relatively favorable conditions, it being the dry season; this increased our ability to observe, unlike with the Mackal expedition, which operated during the rainy season. The scientific team, however, was incomplete, since only one biologist was present, and he had to undertake all the faunal studies on his own. Other expedition members were concerned with botanical aspects and with security.

There was also the problem of obtaining correct information from the local inhabitants, who are always reticent about giving this for fear of falling ill or even dying; their tradition dictates this. It is clear that the inhabitants of the region are well aware of the existence of these extraordinary animals. If these animals are indeed surviving sauropod dinosaurs, it would be further indication that the Likouala region and other similar regions in Central Africa have undergone no important geomorphological and ecological changes since the Cretaceous.

Future Plans

The results obtained by the first Congolese expedition confirm those of the prior American expeditions, one headed by Roy Mackal, and the other by Herman Regusters. The author believes that it is now necessary to undertake a new expedition, on a larger scale and involving more competent individuals. Adequate means, both material and financial, would have to be provided, and an expedition lasting about 3 months would be more productive. It is hoped that the Congolese government will pursue this matter further, and sponsor a systematic inventory of the animal species to be found in the Likouala region.